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ABSTRACT

When the School-to-Work Opportunities Act (STWOA) was initiated in 1994, it was envisioned as a systematic effort to prepare young people for high-skill, high-wage careers and provide them with the academic instruction and foundation skills needed to pursue postsecondary education and lifelong learning. STWOA called for development of three main components in a school-to-work (STW) system: school-based learning, work-based learning, and connecting activities. Because of STW's emphasis on careers, many have erroneously assumed that STW is just about "getting jobs for kids" and have criticized STW because it fosters business involvement in education. However, national evaluation of STW has shown that college-bound and non-college-bound are about equally involved in the experiences promoted by STWOA. Evidence also shows that STW programs linked closely with business have positive results. Although supporters of the STW approach view it as a way to reorganize education, this idea has not had wide appeal. At the micro level, STW has served young people as an avenue to an education that is connected to a career. At the macro level, however, STWOA-funded efforts have served as the basis for some school restructuring efforts but have failed to make broad inroads into the educational and reform movement. (Contains 13 references.) (MN)

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School-to-Work

When the School-to-Work Opportunities Act (STWOA) was initiated in 1994, it was envisioned as "a systematic, comprehensive effort to help all young people (1) prepare for high-skill and high-wage careers, (2) receive top quality academic instruction, and (3) gain the foundation skills to pursue postsecondary education and lifelong learning" (Halperin 1994, p. 4). Because school-to-work (STW) approaches to teaching and learning were seen as most appropriate for students not destined for college, however, it was considered by many to be just another vocational program. This *Myths and Realities* examines some of the beliefs and facts that have surrounded STW during the past 5 years. Included are discussions about its value as a program for all students, its relationship to the business community, its viability as a lever for educational reform, and its sustainability after the end of the STWOA.

Is STW for All Students?

Although the STWOA provided state and community leaders great latitude in implementation, it did call for the development of three main components in a STW system: school-based learning, work-based learning, and connecting activities (Hershey et al. 1999). School-based learning consists of integrated academic and vocational courses that focused on a career area or industry with links to postsecondary education. Partnerships are created with business to develop opportunities for students to take part in worksite learning; these work-based activities coordinate with students' school-based learning. Connecting activities are developed to coordinate the school-based and work-based activities (ibid.).

Because of its emphasis on careers and work-based activities, one of the most prevalent myths surrounding STW is that it is just about "getting jobs for kids" (Steinberg 1998, p. 1). Nothing in the STW philosophy, however, suggests that it is only for those students who plan to work immediately following high school graduation (Bailey and Merritt 1997a).

According to Bailey and Merritt (1997a, b), STW is learner centered, provides authentic learning opportunities, and is based on principles that can benefit all students, including a focus on active learning, exploration of career possibilities and interests, and supervised experiences outside of the classroom. STW approaches can benefit college-bound students in a number of ways. It can help them clarify their personal goals such as the purpose behind attending college; broaden and inform their choices through the exploration of broad job clusters; offer psychological and developmental benefits that academic courses do not necessarily provide; increase their earning power by enabling them to get job experience that can lead to better jobs for those working their way through college; and reinforce academic instruction through the use of applied learning opportunities.

The national evaluation of STW has shown that college-bound and noncollege-bound students are "about equally involved in the experiences the STWOA promotes and value STW activities" (Bailey and Merritt 1997b, p. 1). Despite this positive response from participants, STW has not been widely accepted as a vehicle for preparing for college. A perception exists that STW is designed to prepare students for work directly after high school or community college and that enrolling in STW-related programs may sidetrack students from the academic preparation needed for college. "No matter how many students from such programs proceed to college, some parents, teachers and students fear that such changes might represent a new, more sophisticated tracking mechanism or a further 'dumbing down' of the content of education" (Steinberg 1997, p. xvi). In addition, the existing college admission process relies on traditional measures of student achievement, making it difficult to document many STW activities (Bailey and Merritt 1997b).

Is STW the Handmaiden of Business?

STW has been criticized because it fosters business involvement in education. Not only are students expected to participate in work-based learning activities, but also STW promotes the involvement of business in curriculum development and in helping schools provide programs that prepare youth for jobs. Business involvement in the schools is viewed by critics as diverting the purposes of education away from preparing individuals for participation in a democratic society to a focus on more narrow, job-related skills. Some also believe that this involvement is a part of a plan by business to develop a work force that can be molded to its purposes as well as a strategy to save money on training programs (Steinberg 1997).

Although it is true that STW does encourage a stronger relationship between education and business, valid reasons exist for this advocacy. The skills needed to succeed in the workplace have changed radically but schools have changed very little (Murnane and Levy 1996). The economy is booming and jobs are easy to find, but, unfortunately, nearly one-half of recent high school graduates do not have an education that will allow them to earn a middle-class wage because the skills essential for such jobs are not being taught in many schools. Through closer relationships with business, what schools teach can become more relevant to what is needed in the current and future workplace.

Second, evidence exists that STW programs linked closely with business have positive results. The National Employer Leadership Council (1999) worked with a voluntary group of eight companies to develop a way to measure a return on their investment and the success of youth participants. Each company participated in STW programs that focused on contextual learning that was designed to improve academic achievement. Outcomes of this study demonstrated that STW efforts result in higher academic achievement, reduced dropout rates, better attendance, better college preparation, and better results for African Americans. In addition, the companies themselves had positive benefits, including higher productivity of STW program graduates, reduced recruitment costs, lower training and supervision costs, and productivity of students.

Finally, only about one-third of today's high school students really benefit from a system that is geared to preparing them for college-level academics (Gray 1997). As many as 42% of young people do not enroll in any form of postsecondary education, for example (Bracey 1999). This figure includes both high school graduates as well as those who drop out prior to high school graduation. These young people are among the most likely to be unemployed or employed in low wage jobs. Also, many of the approximately two-thirds of high school graduates who do pursue some form of postsecondary education and training drop out prior to receiving a degree or certificate and only about half of those who enroll in a four-year program graduate within 6 years (Gray 1997). Given these figures, developing stronger ties with business makes sense for education. Through these relationships, schools can begin to develop programs that help all students, not just those who will eventually graduate with a baccalaureate degree. Besides, research shows that STW ap-

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proaches may be better "college prep than college prep," because a higher percentage of students engaged in STW are going to college than those in the regular program (Steinberg 1998, p. 1).

Is STW a Viable Part of School Reform Efforts?

As conceived by the crafters of the STWOA, STW was envisioned as central to educational reform efforts. An early overview article of STW concluded: "School-to-work initiatives represent one of the nation's most promising education reform movements, and initial research findings are optimistic, suggesting that this approach has much to offer as an educational tool" (Ryan and Imel 1996, p. 10). For example, STW learning theories that promote higher-order thinking, depth of knowledge, and connectedness to the world beyond the classroom and provide social support for student achievement are congruent with ongoing reform efforts (Halperin 1994). STW has failed to live up to its promise as a tool for education reform, however. Although it has been used successfully in some areas as a strategy for whole-school reform (e.g., ***The New Urban High School*** 1998), it has remained isolated from the broader education reform movement (Bailey and Merritt 1997a). A number of factors have contributed to this situation, with a major one being the failure of STW to become connected to the standards and assessment movement (Zehr 1998).

The current STW movement bears a remarkable resemblance to the experienced-based career education (EBCE) movement of the 1970s (Steinberg 1997). One difference, however, is that EBCE was seen as a program for only a few students, rather than as "a way to reorganize the way education was delivered to many students" (ibid., p. 186). Although supporters of the current STW approach do view it as a way to reorganize education, this idea has not had wide appeal.

Can STW Be Sustained?

The STWOA is scheduled to end on October 1, 2001, and already many states have received their last round of funding. Without the infusion of federal funds provided by the STWOA, will STW be sustained at the state level? At this juncture, the outlook for widespread sustainability of STW is not positive. The most recent national evaluation report on STW concluded that "although progress [in implementing STW] has been made, the practices that the STWOA promotes may be difficult to sustain [because] STW implementation is rarely at the core of states' high-priority education reforms to increase school accountability and academic standards" (Hershey et al. 1999, p. 1). Because STW is not viewed as integral to school reform efforts, therefore, it is unlikely to be continued in the same way that it has been implemented under the STWOA. This does not mean, however, that STW or the practices it advocates will go away. At the local level, many schools and systems have found enormous success using the approaches advocated by the STWOA and these practices are likely to be sustained.

STW—Has It Made a Difference?

It is too early to tell whether efforts funded through STWOA have made any lasting impact. At this juncture, however, the answer is both "yes" and "no." At the micro level, it has served young people as an avenue to an education that is connected to a career. It has also proven to be a tool that increases retention, encourages enrollment in postsecondary education and training, and leads to high academic achievement. It has also functioned as the basis for school restructuring. At the macro level, however, it has failed to make broad inroads into the educational reform movement despite serving as the basis for some school restructuring efforts.

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